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ABSTRACT

Metacognitive approach responses of preschoolers about sex differences in emotionality were examined to determine if they could be modified by contextual cues. Fear was clearly perceived as a feminine emotion by preschoolers. Sadness was not seen as gender-specific. Females utilized imagery as a mediator of their gender attribution. Results indicate that salient features of a particular situation may override a young child's stereotypic beliefs about emotionality. For children as well as adults, stereotypes may not be exceptionless generalizations. (Author/BEF)

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Preschoolers' Stereotypes about Sex Differences in Emotionality: A Metacognitive Approach

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As you know, by preschool-age, peers have become important agents in the socialization process. One aspect of socialization which is currently receiving much interest is the process of sex-role stereotyping. Several investigators (e.g., Best, Williams, Cloud, Davis, Robertson, Edwards, Giles, & Fowles, 1977; Koblinsky, Cruse, & Sugawara, 1978; Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978; Silvern, 1977; Williams, Bennett, & Best, 1975) have reported sex-role stereotypes in children, even as young as two years of age. One of our interests has focused on sex-role stereotypes in emotionality in preschool-aged children. Specifically, our previous research (Birnbaum, Note 1; Birnbaum, Nosanchuk, & Croll, in press) has found that preschoolers associate anger with males and happiness, sadness, and fear with females.

It has been shown that adults' sex-role stereotypes may influence the manner in which they perceive and interact with children (Condry & Condry, 1976; Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974). Condry and Condry found, for example, that at least in ambiguous situations manipulation of gender label alone resulted in different assessments of perceived emotional state (i.e., anger, male; fear, female). This finding has important implications for the socialization process, for parents are likely to interact differently with a child whom they believe to be angry than with one whom they believe to be afraid. It is our belief that peers as well might assume a similar role.

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This research is also a product of our interest in cognitive development; specifically in metacognition, which is the self-awareness or understanding of the variables that affect cognitive processes (e.g., Flavell, 1971). Up to now, memory and problem-solving processes have been the primary focus of metacognitive studies, but recently Paris (Note 2) has suggested that this approach be extended beyond these traditional experimental tasks of cognitive psychology. He proposes that metacognition be applied to such diverse areas as psychopathology, meditation, and social attribution. The metacognitive study of sex-role stereotypes is such an application to social cognition.

The metacognitive approach allowed us as well to examine whether the stereotypic responses about sex differences in emotionality we previously obtained from preschoolers were generalized expectations or whether they could be modified by contextual cues.

Fifteen male and fifteen female children (mean C.A. = 49.9 months, range = 36-62 months) attending the Child Study Center at the University of Maine, Orono were used as subjects.

Children were run individually by a male and a female experimenter, each of whom tested approximately half of the subjects of each sex. Subjects were presented orally with 8 hypothetical emotional situations in story-form, 2 each for the emotions of anger, happiness, sadness, and fear (Table 1). These particular dimensions of emotion were selected because it has been shown that preschool children are able to understand the meaning of these dimensions (Borke, 1971, 1973; Gates, 1923). The stories described a child's emotional reaction in 8 situations which had been rated previously for sex neutrality by adult subjects.

The children were instructed to listen to each situation and decide if the child in the story was a girl or a boy. Following their gender attributions, subjects were asked the reasons for their choices. This latter question was the metacognitive aspect of the study.

The number of preschoolers making specific gender attributions was obtained separately for male and for female subjects. To test for independence of the sex of subject and attributed gender variables, separate chi-square analyses were performed on the data for each emotional situation. These revealed significant differences between male and female subjects only in the case of Fear-1, χ^2 (1) = 4.24, p <.05. As a result, the data were collapsed across the sex of subject variable for each situation except Fear-1 where separate analyses were performed on the data for male and female subjects. Chi-square analyses revealed significant attributed gender effects in the cases of Anger-1, χ^2 (1) = 6.53, p <.02; Happiness-1, χ^2 (1) = 4.80, p <.05; Fear-1-male, χ^2 (1) = 13.33, p <.001; Fear-1-female, χ^2 (1) = 15.00, p <.001; and Fear-2, χ^2 (1) = 16.13, p <.001. Female was the attributed gender in every case, except Anger-1.

Subjects' metacognitive responses were categorized as sex-role, emotion, action-item, personal, imagery, other, and don't know (see Table 2). Scoring was performed by the second author after an initial reliability check in which both authors independently rated 12 randomly-chosen protocols for the presence or absence of each category response for each story. Interobserver reliabilities ranged from 90% (Imagery) to 100% (Sex-role, Don't Know).

Analysis of the use of categories by sex of subject revealed significant sex of subject differences for emotion, t (28) = -2.34, p <.05, and imagery, t (28) = -2.13, p <.05. In each case, females made more responses in the given metacognitive category than did males.

Analysis of the metacognitive responses suggested that the children's gender attributions may be situation-specific. For example, while Anger-1 was associated with maleness, no significant difference in gender attribution was found for Anger-2. Examination of the children's metacognitive responses for Anger-2 revealed that children who gave sex role and/or emotion explanations (e.g., "He's made.") attributed the expressed anger to males, whereas children who gave action-item explanations (e.g., "On a swing.") attributed the expressed anger to females. This suggests that gender attribution may be mediated by the aspect of the situation to which the child attends.

A further example of situation-specific responding occurred in the case of Happiness-1, which was significantly attributed to females. Unlike the previous case, however, here stimulus-specific responding as reflected by the use of the action-item category apparently produced the significant gender-attribution effect. That is, children who focused on the action in the story (i.e., going on a picnic) were most likely to identify the story-character as female.

In the case of fear which was clearly perceived to be a feminine emotion by the preschoolers in our study, metacognitive responses fell primarily in the emotion and sex role categories. In the case of sadness, which was not perceived to be associated more with one gender than the other, metacognitive responding produced no clear pattern.

Also of interest in the study was the finding that preschoolers' use of imagery was similar to that reported by Cowan and Stewart (1977) for college students. That is, significantly more females utilized imagery as a mediator of their gender attribution. Moreover, the content of the imagery in the two studies was strikingly similar, with hair color and style being reported as the predominant features. Because of these results, a developmental

investigation of the effect of imagery-producing cues in mediating sex-role stereotypes is being conducted.

In summary, this study revealed several interesting findings. First, it provides some further evidence for stereotyping in sex differences in individual aspects of emotionality. Second, it also suggests that for preschoolers these stereotypes may not be generalized expectations but may be modified by contextual cues. That is, the salient features of a particular situation may well override a young child's stereotypic beliefs about emotionality. Thus, it appears that for children, as well as for adults, stereotypes may not be exceptionless generalizations (Brigham, 1971).

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Table 1

Hypothetical Emotional Situations Presented to Preschoolers

Emotion	Situation
Happiness-1	One day this child learns that the child and some friends are going on a picnic. This child is very HAPPY.
Happiness-2	This child awakes on this child's birthday to find a present on the bed. The child is very HAPPY.
Anger-1	The child is building sand castles at the beach. The tide came in and washed the castle away. The child is very ANGRY.
Anger-2	This child is playing on the playground on a swing when someone grabs the swing away. This child is very ANGRY.
Fear-1	This child is playing behind a tree during a game of hide-and-seek when the child steps into a hole and can't get out. The child is very SCARED.
Fear-2	The child is taking its afternoon nap. Suddenly there is a noise underneath the bed. The child is very SCARED.
Sadness-1	This child is playing with its favorite toy when the toy breaks. The child is very SAD.
Sadness-2	This child is supposed to go to the circus Tuesday afternoon. On Tuesday morning the child wakes up sick with the flu and can't go to the circus. The child is very SAD.

Table 2

Definitions and Examples of Metacognitive Categories

Sex Role

Makes reference to boys or girls in general concerning the emotion mentioned in a particular story and/or non-emotional contextual elements of a particular story.

Ex.
S#2 "Girls are very, very scared."
S#8 "Boys play with toys, girls play with dolls."

Emotion

Makes reference to the emotional component of the story.

Ex.
S#15 "Must be a girl 'cause she is scared."
S#22 "He's mad."

Action-Item

Makes reference to the non-emotional contextual component of the story.

Ex.
S#21 "He was building."
S#25 "On a picnic."

Personal

Makes reference to child, family, friends, or possessions.

Ex.
S#4 "I get angry."
S#12 "My toy not broke."

Imagery

Makes reference to elements not originally included in a particular story but relevant to the story line or gender of the story character reported by the child.

Ex.
S#13 "Got long hair."
S#27 "She has blond hair."

Other

Any non-categorical response except "don't know."

Ex.
S#29 "I know everything."
S#23 "It just is."

Don't Know

Subject must say "don't know."